
THE SMOKING CAR WET

By ERNEST H. CHERRINGTON, LL.D., Litt.D.

WE all know the Smoking Car Wet. We meet him in the barber shop, in the hotel lobby, almost any place where men meet and talk. Sinclair Lewis knows him well. He is probably a distant relation of George Babbitt. Sometimes I fancy that he is akin to Schmalz, "The Man Who Knew Coolidge." He is wet. He is wet with a vehemence and a sweep of detail that would probably amaze the folk back home. For our friend the Smoking Car Wet is away from home. From his fluent tongue flow tales of his revels in the realm of King Alcohol. The ease wherewith he gets the real McCoy is most amazing to his auditors. He finds prohibition a failure. He finds its enforcing agents are corrupt. He is shocked and scandalized at the debauchery of flask-toting youth. He is full of curious information concerning how one may make one's own or, if one prefers it, how one can get "the real stuff" almost anywhere that one desires. We have all met him, the Smoking Car Wet.

There is one curious thing about this speci-

men of American fauna. When he gets back home and election day comes around, he enters the voting booth and there face to face with the ballot and a pencil he casts his ballot for the driest candidate upon the ticket. If there is a referendum on some State enforcement law, he votes for that measure. No bootlegger's wares have ever invaded his home. He owns neither a hip flask nor a cocktail shaker. While he knows the names of all the various brands of liquor, he could not tell a pousse cafe from a gin tansy. But he is the Smoking Car Wet.

There is a curious bit of psychology behind all this. The Smoking Car Wet belongs to a fairly large class which has been catalogued and indexed by those who classify humanity by its reactions. He belongs to the same group as the man who brags about his sales and profits, but does not write this interesting fiction on his income tax blank. He is of the same type as the fellow who brags of having made sixty miles an hour, but who in reality is so cautious a driver that the cars behind him honk as he blocks their way. He is a blood brother to the man who hints at his life as a Don Juan, although he has never broken his marriage vows. He is in the same category as the chap who loves to pose as a spendthrift, a gamester, a prodigal wasting his substance in riotous living while he maintains three savings accounts and has a little barrel on his desk in which he carefully deposits all the pennies received in change.

An odd twist in psychology makes men

dislike to pose as unco's guid. They prefer to be thought devilish and raffish. There is nothing new about this phase of human conduct. It made Milton, the Puritan, write much of his own repressed longings into the magnificent character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. The "mute, inglorious Miltons" of today, unable to write a *Paradise Lost*, pour out their unconvincing braggadocia in the smoking car or hotel lobby where they picture themselves as daring rebels against high heaven's law.

But—and there is usually that but—when these are facing fact and not fancy, when they are called upon to exercise their sovereign right as citizens, they forget the windy boasts of libertinage, of profligacy, of liberalism, anti-puritanism, and the rest, and they vote for the ideal. After all, they have been striving to live by that ideal and the loose talk in the smoking room or the Pullman club car has been merely their safety valve of expression, their apology for being decent, honest men, their sop thrown to the Cerberus of masculine adventure. It was just talk. That's all.

The comic tragedy of it all, is that the real wet, the blown-in-the-bottle wet, whose credulity will accept even the bootlegger's guarantee, believes the vaporings of the smoking car orator. Surely, all the world is wet, he feels. He anticipates the hour—not far distant now, he thinks—when once more he can put his foot upon the brass rail, place his elbow on the bar and blow the foam off a glass of beer. He knows that hour must be

coming soon, because all the Smoking Car Wets tell him how they'll vote on election day. And he believes them. And then when election day does come and the dry majorities steadily increase, as they always do, when popular referenda reject the brewers' proposals, then the real wet, most credulous of mankind, wonders how it is that the majority—as how mistakenly reckons while he counts over the number of Smoking Car Wets he has heard talk—is beaten again by the crafty Machiavellianism of the drys. He is puzzled. He is more than puzzled. He knows that the Smoking Car Wet was a wet, but he had not realized that in the vernacular of the day he was "all wet."

